

## **SALTON SEA ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING**

**December 13, 2006**

**9:30 – 3:30**

**Torres Martinez Reservation, Thermal, CA**

### **Welcome and Introductions**

Rick Hoffman, Riverside County, welcomed the Committee Members and led introductions of those present (see attached list).

### **Updates from the Resources Agency**

The October meeting of the Salton Sea Advisory Committee included an overview of the Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) for the Salton Sea Ecosystem Restoration Program. This meeting will include an overview of the phasing assumptions in the PEIR and an update on the progress of the Process for a Preferred Alternative Working Group. In addition, the afternoon's agenda includes an opportunity for the public to address the State and the Salton Sea Advisory Committee and make informal comments on the Draft PEIR.

Dale Hoffman-Floerke, Department of Water Resources (DWR), provided an overview of the recent public outreach workshops that were held in the Salton Sea watershed and throughout the State. Four public outreach meetings were held in the Salton Sea watershed in mid November. Public attendance and participation at each meeting was good. Three public outreach meetings were held outside of the Salton Sea watershed in early December. The meetings were held in Sacramento, Oakland, and San Diego. Additional public outreach meetings will be held in the first or second week in January, prior to the close of the public comment period on the Draft PEIR. Similar to the prior meetings, an opportunity for the public to ask questions and provide informal comments on the Draft PEIR will be provided at these meetings. However, official comments on the Draft PEIR must be submitted in writing.

### **Public Comments**

The following public comments were provided:

- The State should take into consideration the efforts of the Salton Sea Authority (SSA). Over the years, the SSA has conducted a variety of efforts related to restoration of the Salton Sea, and has developed a restoration plan for the Salton Sea. In addition, the restoration alternatives should consider the potential effects of a 100-year storm.
- The State should consider an import/export alternative. In 1968 an engineering firm was retained to prepare plans for a canal to the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California). At

that time, the president of the Republic of Mexico approved plans to construct a sea port in Mexicali. Connection of the Salton Sea to the Gulf of California would provide a tremendous resource for the Salton Sea.

- A potential hybrid alternative that maximizes the Salton Sea for avian and environmental resources should be considered.
- The entire Salton Sea should be restored; it should not be divided into parts or smaller areas.

### **Update on the Natural Community Conservation Plan**

Kim Nicol, Department of Fish and Game (DFG), provided an update on the Natural Community Conservation Plan (NCCP) and implementation of the mitigation requirements for the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) Water Conservation and Transfer Project. The covered species studies should begin in February. The studies will be conducted for all 96 species that are included in the NCCP. The study is intended to determine the distribution of these species within the study area (the IID water service area). In addition, DFG and IID are currently working on land title considerations as part of the land transfer for the Managed Marsh Project. A conceptual design has been conducted for the Managed Marsh Project and the Implementation Team is moving forward with further design and environmental review.

### **Update on U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Activities**

Mike Walker, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), provided an update on Reclamation's Feasibility Study. Reclamation has continued their efforts to evaluate a suite of alternatives for restoration of the Salton Sea. Mr. Walker provided an overview of the description of the alternatives and a comparison of Reclamation's alternatives to those being considered by the State. A summary of Reclamation's alternatives and the related discussion are provided below.

- **Reclamation's Alternative 1: Mid-Sea Dam with North Marine Lake (Salton Sea Authority Alternative)**—This alternative is similar to State's Alternative 7. However, the barrier has been moved further north, changes to the Saline Habitat Complex acreage have been made, and the air quality management component includes use of water efficient vegetation. Based on a question from a Committee Member, it was noted that the elevation of the Marine Sea is assumed to be -237 feet mean sea level.
- **Reclamation's Alternative 2: Mid-Sea Barrier with South Marine Lake**—This alternative includes a semi-permeable barrier that would divide the Salton Sea. This alternative is similar to the State's Alternative 8.
- **Reclamation's Alternative 3: Concentric Lakes (Imperial Group Concept)**—This alternative is based on the Imperial Group's Concentric Lakes concept. However,

Reclamation did not include a fourth lake as proposed by the Imperial Group. In addition, other changes were made to the alternative to account for Reclamation's Public Protection and Safety of Dams guidelines. This alternative is similar to the State's Alternative 4.

- **Reclamation's Alternative 4: North-Sea Dam and Marine Lake**—This alternative is similar to the State's Alternative 5 and includes a Marine Sea in the northern portion of the Salton Sea that is fed primarily by the Whitewater River.
- **Reclamation's Alternative 5: Habitat Enhancement without Marine Lake**—This alternative is similar to the State's Alternative 2 and includes Saline Habitat Complex without a large Marine Sea.
- **Reclamation's Alternative 6: No Action Alternative**—Reclamation's No Action Alternative is similar to the State's No Action Alternative-Variability Conditions. The No Action Alternative considers air quality management and the potential for reduced inflows to the Salton Sea in the future.

Based on questions from Committee Members, Mr. Walker noted that following:

- All alternatives assume 70 percent of the exposed playa would be emissive and 50 percent of that amount would need to be managed with water efficient vegetation.
- Reclamation is working on the cost estimates for the various alternatives, and is likely to release the cost estimates early next year. Due to Reclamation's Public Protection and Safety of Dams guidelines, the cost estimates may be a little higher than expected.

Mr. Walker noted that Reclamation currently anticipates releasing a public review draft of the report in late January and submitting the final report to Congress in April.

### **Update from the Salton Sea Authority**

Rick Daniels, Salton Sea Authority (SSA), provided an update on the SSA's activities. The SSA has continued public outreach efforts and has received a number of resolutions in support of the SSA's plan. The SSA continues to work with Reclamation on the water quality pilot study and on additional geotechnical work. Other activities include the following: working with the University of California at Riverside on establishing a Salton Sea Research Center; and, working with the U.S. Geological Survey on a Salton Sea Science Symposium in the spring of 2007.

### **Review of Phasing Assumptions in PEIR**

Gwen Buchholz, CH2M HILL, provided an overview of the phasing assumptions in the PEIR. Construction phasing determines when functional habitat will be available under each of the alternatives. In addition, phasing determines funding needs for construction

and operations and maintenance, and could influence the ability to construct other projects in the area due to air quality regulations, availability of materials, or traffic congestion. Pre-construction activities include evaluation of project-specific alternatives, acquisition of easements or land deeds, and obtaining permits. Some facilities, such as Saline Habitat Complex, Air Quality Management, and access roads, would need to be constructed after the water recedes. However, other facilities, such as perimeter dikes and barriers, could be constructed before the Sea recedes.

Based on a question from a Committee Member, it was noted that the PEIR assumes that land or easements would be acquired for the project. However, the PEIR does not assume that the implementing agency will condemn land for the project. In addition, the phasing timelines included in the PEIR do not account for the time needed to acquire land.

### **Status of Process for Preferred Alternative Working Group**

Dale Hoffman-Floerke, DWR, provided an update on the status of the Process for Preferred Alternative Working Group. At the October Advisory Committee Meeting, the Committee requested that the Working Groups identify and define attributes that would assist in selecting the Preferred Alternative. The Working Groups were also tasked with preparing matrices to score and compare alternatives based on the set of attributes identified. Based on a question from a Committee Member, Mrs. Hoffman-Floerke noted that the Working Groups are also looking at components in this process; however, considering components works for some attributes, but not for others. It was noted that the State would prefer that the Advisory Committee make a recommendation on a Preferred Alternative as a body rather than as individual members.

The Committee discussed the potential timeframes and considerations for land acquisition. A Committee Member noted that a process should be identified that describes the steps to land acquisition and the potential for land acquisition before preparation of the project-level Environmental Impact Report.

### **A Potential Hybrid Alternative**

Mike Cohen, Pacific Institute, provided an overview of a potential approach to developing a hybrid alternative. Mr. Cohen noted that the approach is intended to look beyond the specific alternatives that are currently included in the Draft PEIR. Each alternative in the Draft PEIR has specific drawbacks and benefits, and two of the alternatives have evolved since the preparation of the Draft PEIR. The proposed approach is intended to look at the components of the alternatives and combine them into an alternative that meets the needs of all of the stakeholders while meeting the objectives of the legislation. Potential considerations in selecting a Preferred Alternative include habitat, air quality protection, water quality protection, and costs. In addition, the Salton Sea Coalition views interim habitat measures, construction phasing and realization of benefits, and flexibility and adaptability are also key to any alternative.

Some Committee Members expressed concerns regarding the introduction of a new alternative at this point in the process. In addition, some Committee Members expressed concerns that the Salton Sea Coalition did not present a new alternative, but rather a process for development of a Preferred Alternative. A process for selecting a Preferred Alternative is being established by the Working Group, and the Committee should work together to complete this process. A Committee Member noted that any alternative that considers water transfers out of the Imperial Valley would not be supported by some the Committee Members. In addition, a few Committee Members expressed a desire to see Reclamation's Feasibility Study before making a recommendation on a Preferred Alternative.

Mr. Cohen and other members of the Salton Sea Coalition noted that the Coalition is not proposing a new alternative. Rather, they are attempting to use the current range of alternatives by mixing and matching, pulling the best pieces from each of the alternatives. A member of the Coalition noted that the alternatives in the Draft PEIR should not be viewed as static, rather these alternatives can be modified to better meet the objectives of the various stakeholders.

### **Public Comments on Draft PEIR**

The following public questions and comments were provided:

- When will a Preferred Alternative be selected? Who makes the decision to implement the Ecosystem Restoration Project and when will this decision be made?
- The Salton Sea Advisory Committee has completed a substantial effort with release of the Draft PEIR. The Committee should not have a closed mind and should consider and be willing to accept different alternatives than were included in the Draft PEIR and/or accept a variation to one of the alternatives.
- California has lost a substantial amount of wetlands. It is critical that there is no further loss of habitat for birds. Air quality impacts and dust generated should be minimized. The SSA's plan is too costly. Their plan relies on land development around the Salton Sea. If this development does not occur, then the taxpayers will end up paying for the plan. In addition, the barrier proposed in the SSA's plan is very invasive to the environment.
- The Draft PEIR does not consider accelerating the rate at which salinity increases in the Sea. The Salton Sea is in a transition from a marine lake to a hypersaline lake. Other hypersaline lakes do not have the fish kills and water quality problems that occur at the Salton Sea. A connection to the ocean should be constructed to accelerate the rate of salinity increases at the Salton Sea. Higher salinities at the Sea would reduce organisms that create odor problems and fish kills.

### **Opportunity for Advisory Committee Comments**

No comments were provided by the Advisory Committee Members during this agenda item.

### **Summary of Action Items**

The Advisory Committee will be meeting several times next year. The next meeting will be held in mid- to late-February in the Sacramento area. A Process for the Preferred Alternative Working Group meeting will be held after the close of the comment period for the Draft PEIR.

### **Handouts**

Copies of the following presentations:

- Phasing Assumptions in Draft PEIR
- Status of Process for Preferred Alternative Recommendation

## ATTENDANCE

### Advisory Committee Members or Alternates Present:

Lee Case, U.S. Geological Survey  
Bart Christensen, State Water Resources Control Board  
Michael Cohen, Pacific Institute  
Kim Delfino, Defenders of Wildlife  
Bill DuBois, California Farm Bureau Federation  
Larry Grogan, Imperial County  
Elston Grubaugh, Imperial Irrigation District  
Rick Hoffman, Riverside County  
Al Kalin, Imperial County Farm Bureau  
Julia Levin, Audubon California  
Al Loya, Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians  
Lisa Northrop, Bureau of Indian Affairs  
Dan Parks, Coachella Valley Water District  
Jason Rhine, California Waterfowl Association  
Reyes Romero, Imperial County Air Pollution Control District  
John Scott, The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California  
Vincent Signorotti, Geothermal Energy Association  
Mike Walker, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation  
John Wohlmuth, Coachella Valley Association of Governments  
Nancy Wright, Regional Water Quality Control Board